Coastal atmospheres: the peninsula of the blessed and the art of noticing

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the atmosphere of Dangast, a coastal village located at the Jadebusen, a huge bay at the North Sea coast of Lower Saxony. To write about atmospheres means evoking a specific forcefield, which is different from observing and analyzing an object from a distance. In the first part, I write about my own experience of the coastal atmosphere by “looking around rather than ahead,” as Tsing (2015) defined the art of noticing. Based on his paintings, on literature, and interviews, I show in the second part how a local artist, the painter Franz Radziwill, made the specific atmosphere of Dangast explicit. Finally, I follow a citizens’ initiative on their way to preserve the specific atmosphere of this coastal village as an artists’ place. In doing so, I provide a detailed insight into the atmospheres of democracy, which define how transitions take place and decisions are taken locally. In the conclusion, I argue that the focus on coastal atmospheres is a way to transcend the boundaries between nature and culture and to undermine the teleological argument of growth and development which more often than not shape coastal politics.

Introduction

Dangast is one of the oldest seaside-resorts at the German North Sea coast, and it is known as an artists’ place. The painter Franz Radziwill (1895–1983), who lived there for the most part of his life, named one of his many portrayals of Dangast “The peninsula of the blessed in the twentieth century” (Fig. 1). The picture from 1971 shows the coastal village as a paradisiacal place which is obviously endangered by environmental pollution. Islands of the blessed are, by definition, inhabited by the heroes of Greek mythology. On this painting, we see a nude couple, like Adam and Eve, playing and reading in the dunes, right in front of heaps of civilizational debris. There is trouble in paradise in the 1970s, when Radziwill painted this picture. But the painting is more than a critique of environmental pollution. It reveals something else, a potential, a specific light, which makes this peninsula different from other places. Radziwill transcends the nature-culture divide in making explicit a specific atmosphere that is manifest in the composition of this coastal scenery, which displays people, litter, a wide range of colors,

and a torn sky with symbolic signs. The painting reminds the observer of the danger of environmental pollution, but what is even more at stake is the atmosphere of the peninsula. But what exactly is an atmosphere, and how can it be protected?

Fig. 1 Die Halbinsel der Seligen im 20. Jahrhundert, by Franz Radziwill. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020

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The goal of this article is to explore the nature of Dangast's atmosphere, and I will do so from three different positions. In the first part, I make an exercise in the anthropological “art of noticing” and I “look around instead of ahead,” as suggested by Anna Tsing (2015: 22): I watched a cycle of tides, trying to notice the atmosphere, and I took notes of the things in the air and on my mind. In the second part, I discuss with the help of Peter Sloterdijk's “Terror from the air” (2007) how Franz Radziwill makes the atmosphere of Dangast explicit. In the final part, I give an insight into the “atmospheres of democracy” (Latour and Weibel 2005) at the example of a citizens' initiative which tries to preserve the reputation of Dangast as an artists' place, against the plans of real estate and municipal restructuring managers. In doing so, I will present a polyphonic view of Dangast's atmosphere as an ethnographic exercise in portraying a coastal landscape beyond the boundaries of nature and culture. Even though this article touches subjects like the history of a coastal sea-resort, tourism, or questions of heritage, the focus is on the atmosphere, which is so often talked about in Dangast but hard to pin down. Rather, it is something that has to be evoked, to be performed through narrative, through visual art or through the art of democratic protest. In the following, I will start with a short introduction into Dangast as an artist's place, followed by a theoretical reflection about atmosphere as an object of anthropological interest.

Dangast as an artists' place

Dangast has a long tradition as a *Künstlerdorf*, an artists' place.¹ The coastal village is one the oldest sea-resorts at the North Sea coast, and it is located at the southern end of the Jadebusen, a huge bay in the German bight. A hundred years ago, a group of German expressionists, who later on became known as the group called die *Brücke*, liked hanging out and working there. They felt inspired by the light and its changes, which is praised by artists, locals, and tourists alike. Pure Wadden Sea, so to speak, contained by dikes except in Dangast, where the *Geest*—land consisting of the alluvial material of the age ice—directly meets the sea. Its most famous inhabitant, the painter Franz Radziwill, who was friends with the members of die *Brücke*, moved to Dangast around 1920, where he spent the rest of his life. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, performance artists associated with Joseph Beuys met at the *Kurhaus* in Dangast, which is nowadays a restaurant. From this era result the iconic art sculptures on the beach in front of the *Kurhaus*: a huge granite phallus, of 3.5 m height by Eckhart Grenzer; the empty throne of the “*Kaiser von Butjatha*”; and, at the end of a landing bridge, Anatol's famous green nude sculpture, “*Jade 2*.” The bridge is emblazoned with a row

of rainbow flags, another one is painted on the stonewall which supports the natural cliff. There is no doubt: art is a prominent feature of Dangast, and it is part of the official representation as a seaside-resort with a special flair. But despite its reputation as a *Künstlerdorf*, an artists' village, Dangast has to compete with other tourist destinations and is subject to special interests and dynamics, such as local politics, profitability, and market compatibility. In short, Dangast is both a place of this world and a peninsula of the blessed.

Recently, Dangast has changed a lot. A few years ago, in 2013, the municipality of Varel, to which Dangast belongs, had sold public land—formerly a *Kurpark*²—in the center of the village to a real estate broker, who immediately started building dozens of houses with tourist apartments, with an intended capacity of 700 beds. A citizens' initiative tried to prevent the project in order to keep the former *Kurpark* intact and to preserve the unique atmosphere of Dangast. They even went to court, but they lost. During my research on local knowledge about climate change,³ I became interested in the case. Between 2018 and 2019, I conducted interviews with the mayor, the *Kurdirektor*, and the investors, with members of the dike association, the lock-keeper of the Dangast sluice, and many more. I attended meetings of the citizens' initiative and other NGOs, and I learned about the life and work of the famous artist from his daughter, Constanze Radziwill. I was invited for tea, I went for many walks with various people, and I liked to hang out at the coast. I wrote my diary in the Italian café *Gelateria al Mare* among tourists during the season and alone at the end of autumn, when everything else shuts down in Dangast, and I staged two public workshops about the future of the coastal climate. One of the effects of long-time fieldwork is the increasing familiarity with a place. There are field notes of encounters, interviews, and events, and there are smells, sounds, and light, and there are the ghosts of the past which make their appearance in monuments, ritual events, or individual life stories. Most of it gets lost in the ethnographic reports which increasingly serve a profane purpose, which is an age-old anthropological complaint. However, anthropology always was interested in the specific atmosphere of a place, an atmosphere which makes it different from other places and signifies a specific way of being.

Atmospheres in anthropology

Atmosphere is a concept with a long tradition in the humanities, and it has recently gained a new momentum in the course

¹ The following information about Dangast is derived from Schmidt (2019), Lüpke and Hinck (1981, 1993), and tourist leaflets.

² The *Kurpark* is not related to the *Kurhaus*; the former one is in the eastern part of the village, the latter in the western part.

³ This article about atmospheres results from my research about the “Co-development of place-based climate services for action,” a JPI/ERA4C project. It is part of a series of articles about the local perception of weather and climate change (Krauß 2019, 2020; Krauß and Bremer 2020), forms of local protest (Krauß 2021), and the role of art (Baztan et al. 2020).

of the debate about the more-than-human approaches in anthropology. In 2018, anthropologists Schroer and Schmitt (2018) edited a book about “Exploring atmospheres ethnographically.” In the introduction, they locate the anthropological origins of the concept in the early works of Mauss and Durkheim, who used atmosphere (or *ethos*) in order to infuse life to their ethnographic descriptions of human behavior, the specific atmosphere in which rituals or negotiations take place. Clifford Geertz followed in their footsteps and linked atmosphere to his concept of thick description; the atmosphere is something that it is brought into being through writing. This is one of the paradoxes inherent in the notion of atmosphere: it does not exist outside of the observer. But where exactly is it? Does it stand between the observer and the object, like Böhme (2013, in Schroer and Schmidt, 6) might say, or does it permeate everything, as a medium? Schroer and Schmitt favor Tim Ingold’s notion of atmosphere based on “the experience of weather, wind and light” as an “all enveloping experience” (Ingold 2011: 134).

In non-representational theory or affect theory, atmospheres are non-intentionally and precursory to our thoughts, as defined by Stewart (2011: 452):

“An atmosphere is not an inert context but a force field in which people find themselves. It is not an effect of other forces but a lived affect—a capacity to affect and to be affected that pushes a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event. It is an attunement to the senses, of labors, and imaginaries to potential ways of living in or living through things”.

Atmospheres are not exclusive to human activities; according to Walter Benjamin, things have an aura, too, and in her political ecology of things, Jane Bennett (2010) argues that each kind of materiality, be it a stone or the climate, is “vibrant matter.” Maybe the most explicit protagonist of a theory of the atmosphere, of a “spherology,” is the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2004). He argues that humans inhabit a series of extending bubbles, such as the womb of the mother, the family, the school, the professional life, the municipality, or the nation. These bubbles or spheres are co-produced and co-inhabited, they have to be air-conditioned, immunized and animated, and they are transparent to each other. This architectural approach serves well to explore a place like Dangast and its specific atmosphere that is co-produced by the interaction of the geo-, hydro-, bio-, atmo- and anthroposphere in the so-called critical zone, which is both a geological term and the title of an exhibition by Bruno Latour.⁴ According to Latour (2018a), the nineteenth century

was the age of the social question, while the twenty-first century is the one of the geo-social question.

All of these different definitions and conceptions of atmosphere have one thing in common: they are only accessible from a situated perspective and from within. Like art, anthropology relies on the art of noticing, on looking around instead of looking ahead, of listening to the many, polyphonic voices instead of reducing reality along sectorial interests, in the name of progress (Tsing 2015, 17ff.). Artists and anthropologists have an interest in other forms of reality, in vernacular, indigenous forms of knowledge. The focus on atmospheres undermines the exclusive definition of climate as statistics, of the mapping of space along latitudes and longitudes. In the Anthropocene, everything is inclusive. The world is no longer a stage for the bourgeois drama. The décor, the framework, and the atmosphere are now part of the drama (Latour 2018a, 80).

It is only a small step from the world at large to the local, from the general to the specific and back. Spending days and weeks throughout a couple of years as an anthropologist in Dangast turns the décor, the framework into sensual sensations, like the air that I breathe, the ground my feet stand on or the *Schlick* that I sink in. Simultaneously, theories read, lessons learned, stories heard, and memories of interviews and events melt with the sensation of being there. There are things in the air that normally slip the attention and do not find their way into the reports. The focus on atmospheres necessitates this form of attention. Finally, I made an experiment in atmospheric research to find this out.

The art of noticing: exploring coastal atmospheres

Is it possible to notice the atmosphere? Is it possible to sense the working of geology, to feel the tides, to experience the atmosphere of a coastal landscape? Are they all “vibrant matter,” as Joan Bennett (2010) suggests? Towards the end of April 2019, on a sunny day, I staged an experiment which was inspired by Hugh Aldersey-Williams’ book “Tides. The science and lore of the greatest force on earth” (2016). He dedicates a whole chapter to the unusual idea of watching a cycle of tides and the dramatic life of those non-human actors that are both sea- and earthbound, in person, at one of his favorite places at the Norfolk coast. Taking up this idea, I spent approximately nine hours at my favorite place, the terrace of the old *Kurhaus*, from the beginning of the low tide to the return of the flood. Aldersey-Williams has an education in natural sciences, and he brought a small boat and some gear for observing tidal forms of life closely, as well as something to read. I was armed with my anthropological equipment, an old-fashioned notebook, and my iPhone, which I used as a camera and where I hoped to

⁴ From the exhibition catalogue: “The thought exhibition “CRITICAL ZONES” invites us to deal with the CRITICAL situation of the Earth in various ways and to explore new ways of coexistence between all forms of life”: <https://zkm.de/en/exhibition/2020/05/critical-zones>

find all the information which might support my observations. My goal was to look around, to practice the art of noticing, to observe all the things that happen in the air and elsewhere, and to take notes. Aldersey-Williams tried to avoid daydreaming, while I was open to whatever came to my mind.

Falling tide

I arrived around 9:30 a.m. at the *Kurhaus*, a huge building owned by the T. family. It is part of their considerable property on this peninsula, including the beach, which they make accessible to the public. Even though their *Kurhaus* restaurant serves people only on weekends, they leave tables and garden chairs outside for anyone's use. The *Kurhaus* stands on a cliff, an extension of the *Geest*, the sandy alluvial from the ice ages which makes this one of the few places on the North Sea coast that is not protected by dikes. Elevated up to twelve meters above the sea, it provides a beautiful view of the Jadebusen. I found a nice and quiet place, a chair and a table, surrounded by old oak trees. It was a morning in the end of April, no holiday season yet, there were only a few tourists around.

I drew a sketch of the scenery into my notebook (Fig. 2): the throne of the Emperor of Butjatha, the rainbow flags, the sculpture Jade2, wind turbines on the horizon, only the granite phallus was out of my sight.

Fig. 2 Schlick. Drawing by Werner Krauß

Vibrant matter The sky was blue, the sun on its way South, slowly warming up the cool morning air. Once in a while birds argued, leaves rustled, feet shuffled over gravel. An elderly couple was sitting nearby, all day long, except that they changed seats once. They were avid readers and hardly talked to each other.

And, of course, there was the sea in front of me, or, to be more exact, it was not there. Instead, there was the mudflat, the *Watt* which gives name to the UNESCO world heritage Wadden Sea, contained by a line of dikes that stretches in an elliptic form from

South to North. A couple of hundred meters to my left, there was the fortress-like Dangast sluice, with its huge and heavy floodgates open. The water from the drainage system in the inland slowly and steadily streamed into the mudflat along a tidal creek that zigzags through the bay. From my seat, I was able to see some wind turbines and could guess (because they are hidden by the dike) the coastal settlements with names like Zetel, Cäciliengroden, Mariensiel, Sande, and, on the opposite side, the city of Wilhelmshaven. I was well aware that I had a thousand and more years of colonization and land reclamation right before my eyes. The history of the Jadebusen is closely linked to the foundation of the German Reich in the nineteenth century and the construction of Germany's only deep-sea port in Wilhelmshaven, at the mouth of the bay (Blackbourne 2006). The white chimneys of the coal plant of Wilhelmshaven mark the horizon of Dangast. I thought of the dead souls and church bells buried under the mudflats in front of me. Inadvertently, a quote from Heiner Müller's "Hamletmaschine" (n.d.) came to my mind, which I looked up on my iPhone:

"Ich war Hamlet. Ich stand an der Küste und redete mit der Brandung BLABLA, im Rücken die Ruinen von Europa. Ich legte mich auf den Boden und hörte die Welt ihre Runden drehen im Gleichschritt der Verwesung." (I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and talked BLABLA with the surf, the ruins of Europe in my back. I laid myself down on the soil and listened how the world turned around in cadences of decline. Translation by the author).

Low tide/ebb

A few children and tourists with rolled-up pants playfully panted through the mud, the *Schlick*, sinking in knee-deep. When the sluice was built in the sixties, an additional layer of sediments was deposited on top of the Wadden mudflats, which makes it difficult to walk in. I liked watching the children and grown-ups alike wading like storks with black legs through the mud. From the distance and against the sun, they reminded me of Tim Ingold (2007), who never tires to explain that we are not standing on the surface of the earth and beneath the sky, but that we are in the world, knee-deep in the mud and enmeshed in wind and weather. *Schlick* is animated matter, and it is onomatopoeic: the poet Thomas Kling (1996, 79) wrote a poem about it, "Schlick," using the German clusters of consonants in order to replicate its sound:

eure kartn, sprach- und	your maps, language- and
seekartn, tickets, taugn nichts, leute	nautical maps, tickets, mean nothing, guys
gefälschte, lachhafte papiere, eben	faked, ridiculous papers, just even
flebben! aus der forschung	flebbbs! taken from research;
genommenes; gekrickel; untauglich-	scrawl; proof of use-
keitsnachweise? di menge	lessness. lotsof
(....) silbengezappel zappelndes silber im	syllable wriggling wriggling silver in
bodenlosn, gehievt. schleppnetz zunge;	the bottmless, heft. trawl tongue;
richtig glitschig alles. (...)	really glibbery all (...)
di sonne. wi teer	th sun. tar-lik
(excerpt of “Schlick,” translation by the author, WK)	

Science plays a crucial role in the management of the North Sea coastline, but in Thomas Kling’s poem, cartography, maps, instruments, purpose, and goals are in danger of drowning in the bubbling of the *Schlick*, in its consonant existence.

Rising tide

There is only twice a day enough water for swimming, for two hours or so, the rest of the day there is mud. The Jadebusen empties rapidly, due to the shallow cover of water. The Etta von Dangast, an old tourist vessel, does not care about the tides and offers daily tours. The long one takes 5 ½ hours, passes through the Jadebusen into the open sea, where it makes a visit to the seal colonies and the marine port of Wilhelmshaven. It left the harbor at low tide, in the late morning, meandering along the gully which still carries enough water, zigzagging through the *Schlick*, passing through huge piles of mud resembling stranded humpback whales. Only the upper deck is visible, the rest of it is hidden in the gully (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Etta von Dangast. Photo by Werner Krauß

With the flood, a light breeze comes up, the birds gather on sandbanks, and following an invisible command, they rise in geometric formations, like a matrix, sparkling from below, black from the top. A spectacle that is as old as the Wadden Sea, as Karsten Reise (2013a,b) points out in his natural history of the Wadden Sea, which makes my afternoon read. He does not believe in the concepts of classical ecology and narrates the geo-history of the Wadden Sea as the result of the interaction between humans and the sea, full of contingencies, and he argues against the definition of the UNESCO world heritage site as pure nature:

“The natural balance is a mere ghost of the past or an esoteric dream. The myth of an ecological balance is a residue from the old type of natural history before temporality was introduced by evolutionary thinking. The natural history of the Wadden Sea shows that the equilibrium concept is not a proper model for the long sequence of changes which have occurred.” (Reise 2013a: 69)

In the German version of the text (Reise 2013b), he adds that this dream of “natürliche Ursprünglichkeit ist ein Wahn, verwandt mit dem der “reinen Rasse”” (The idea of pure nature is an illusion similar to the idea of pure race). It is a German landscape, no doubt, and maybe it is better to keep its secrets to native German speakers.

There are the voices of chatting ladies who come here for their afternoon picnic, children are playing in the *Schlick*, couples take selfies in front of the sculpture of the erect granite phallus, an event manager plans the marriage of a young couple, and a white cloud rises from the coal plant in Wilhelmshaven. On its way back, the Etta von Dangast zigzags along the tidal creek, now followed by the shrimp fishing vessel, together staging an imaginary ballet. Having been lost with things in the air, I almost missed that the water was slowly rising, filling the gullies and tidal holes, tentatively searching for new beds, with an irresistible force, lazily licking at the human constructions which contain it, most of the time. Inevitably, the Jadebusen will soon be filled with salty water, again.

People arrive with towels and put on their swimming suits. A light breeze is coming up; the air is filled with motion. The floodgates are already closed; the boats in the small port eagerly await the flood as do the excited children and the birds on the golden heaps of mud. It is a perfect moment. Everything is animated. Excited, I write in my notebook: this is it, the atmosphere of the peninsula of the blessed.

I end up in a nearby beer joint, the *Klause*, where I get a seat with a view. The beer joint fills up with people who come from work or simply want to enjoy a sundowner. There is a lot of chatter and laughter this evening, on the peninsula of the blessed, and I was not surprised to overhear

conversations about real estate, here and there. I take my e-reader and look for Latour's recent book, which in Germany is aptly entitled as "Das terrestrische Manifest" (Latour 2018b). Terrestrial means that geology and climate are no longer the stage and framework for the human drama, but that they are part of it. For the North Sea coast, this has always been true, I think, and when it was forgotten, the destructive power of the storm floods painfully reminded people of the active role of non-human agents. The terrestrial is vibrant matter. Latour (2018a, 156) writes that "from the soil, this attractor (the terrestrial, WK) inherits materiality, heterogeneity, thickness, dust, humus, the succession of layers, strata, the attentive care that it requires," and I would like to add the *Schlick*. This is the compost, to use another Latourian term, of which the atmosphere, the critical zone, is made. This kind of mapping is different from the cartography along latitudes and longitudes, from google maps. It is "just the opposite of a plot of ground that a development or real estate project has just grabbed. The ground, the soil, in this sense, cannot be appropriated. One belongs to it; it belongs to no one." (Latour 2018a, 156f.). I nodded in agreement. I paid my bill and walked back to the village, seeing the coastal scenery with Franz Radziwill's "Pensinsula of the blessed in the twentieth century" on my mind.

Making atmospheres explicit: the art of Franz Radziwill

The Franz Radziwill museum is located in the house where he lived with his family, and it is managed by his daughter, Constanze Radziwill, and the Franz Radziwill society. It is a small and cozy house, which the artist, who had learned the profession of a brick layer, has steadily improved and restored. Dangast was a village of fishermen and small farmers, and for a long time, the lifestyle of the artist did not differ too much from them in terms of poor income. Born in the nearby Wesermarsch and raised in Bremen, he moved to Dangast in the 1920s. In art history, he played a singular role as an artist who adhered to the "new objectivity" after war, when everybody else turned abstract. Later on, his style was dubbed as "magic realism." Both terms might fit for the painting from which I borrowed the title of this article, "The peninsula of the blessed in the twentieth century" (1971). It is one of his last pictures before he lost his sight and could not paint anymore. It is this painting which inspired me to think about the coastal atmosphere as a common denominator for what is at risk in the village of Dangast.

My insights are based on the vast literature about Radziwill, most of all on the catalogue (Denizel 2016) which accompanied the 2016 exhibition "The peninsula of the blessed" in the Radziwill museum in Dangast, on a detailed

biography by Eberhard Schmidt (2019), and on my conversations with his daughter, Constanze Radziwill. My focus is on the "explication" of the atmosphere, supported by a short history of the air as presented by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2007).

Crashing airplanes and the discovery of the environment

Radziwill is known for his signature motifs such as torn skies, crashing airplanes, and bricks. An early painting, "Der Todessturz des Karl Buchstätters" (*The Death Plunge of Karl Buchstätter*, 1928), shows an airplane crash which goes, according to Schmidt (2019, 17), back to an event in Bremen. As a young man, he had observed an air show, where an accident brought death to two pilots. Radziwill, who was a soldier in two World Wars and had an ambivalent relation to national socialism,⁵ had a life-long fascination with airplanes, which appear once and again in his paintings, as symbols of progress and modernity as well as those of doom and destruction. There is "Das rote Flugzeug" (1932, The red airplane), which presents in realist detail a propeller aircraft of the German air force, parked on a field with the Grim Reaper in the background and menacing clouds in form of a skull. In his painting "flugzeuge/immer schneller fliegen" (1938, airplanes/flying faster and faster), dozens of military airplanes fly close above the landscape which they obviously intend to attack. In many of his pictures, Radziwill shows the destructive force of airplanes that do not only attack objects and people, but the material conditions of life, the environment.

The strange fascination with airplanes brings to mind the manifesto-like book of Peter Sloterdijk (2007), "Terror from the Air," where he already states in the beginning: "The discovery of the 'environment' took place in the trenches of World War I" (ibid, 18). In his negative theory of explication through air-terrorism, Sloterdijk develops a theory of the air and the atmosphere as the basic life conditions for human beings. According to him, the starting point for this discovery were the German gas attacks in WWI, which did not aim at the enemies directly, but at the poisoning of their environment, of the air. Gas chambers in concentration camps and the invention of pest control in the USA (all invented by the same German chemist, Haber) rest on the same idea, as does air-conditioning of arcades, houses, greenhouses, shopping malls, or space ships. From here, many paths lead to the insight that human life depends on

⁵ Between the wars, Radziwill showed interest in the ideology of national socialism. In this period, he was as productive as ever, while many of his paintings were considered as *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art) (Neumann-Dietzsch 2010).

a breathable atmosphere; we are no longer the masters of nature, but “atmosphere designers and climate guardians,” as Sloterdijk (2007, 89) puts it.

Radziwill’s paintings reveal an ambivalent attitude towards airplanes and, in doing so, to modernity. Another painting shows the *Kurhaus* from the seaside, *Strand von Dangast mit Flugbooten* (1929, Dangast Beach with Flying Boats). A massive airplane flies proudly over Dangast and the *Kurhaus*. Sailing boats float on the sea, a rowing boat rests on the beach. The sky is torn and colorful, the sun looks otherworldly. The *Kurhaus* is in the center of the painting, surrounded by and enmeshed in green trees. It displays the place where I watched the cycle of tides; the scenery has hardly changed. For Radziwill, there was promise in modernity, too. This *Flugboot* does not bring destruction, like the airplanes did in many other of his paintings. There is a flipside to Sloterdijk’s negative theory of air-terrorism, and this is the emergence of environmental awareness. The material conditions of life are not a given, but human activities are deeply enmeshed in weather, wind, and light, in the “all enveloping experience,” as Ingold (2011: 134) puts it.

In all of his paintings, human and non-human actors are actively shaping the environment, creating atmospheres. There are plants, painted in shining white, which emerge from the night and wind up around houses (*Landschaft mit weißen Bäumen* 1928, Landscapes with White Trees), and there are once and again bricks, painted with great scrutiny by an artist who was a learned bricklayer (*Das Fenster meines Nachbarn*, 1930, My Neighbor’s Window). And, of course, there are the omnipresent clouds, there is the mud, the *Schlick*, and the sea. The trees, the bricks, the *Schlick*, they are all “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010). In an exhibition in honor of Radziwill’s 125th birthday in Oldenburg, I was impressed by his painting *Wattlandschaft/Watt mit gelbem Boot* (1955, WaddenScape; Wadden with Yellow Boat), where the huge piles of *Schlick* of the Jadebusen during low tide seamlessly merge with the dark skies, the clouds, and the weather. The yellow rowing boat is lying on ground as did the fisher boats during his lifetime, when the fish had to be carried on sledges especially designed for the mudflats to the land. There was no picture without Dangast in mind for him:

“For me, Dangast is a source of inspiration. The sky is in a different light, every hour, every minute, and I can see strangest forms of clouds. I have the sea and the changes of the tides. In the North West, the horizon is dispersed with the cranes and launchways of Wilhemshaven. Airplanes rush high above me in the sky, and on winter days, there is the ghostly Northern light on the sky. But I get inspiration, too, from the small world of the fishermen with their boats and nets, the world of the farmers. I see the marshes in front of me and the bumpy land with the fine old trees and architectures. A walk on the dike, stepping out of the house, sets in

motion a world of memories.” (in Schmidt 2020, 60 translation WK).

There are different layers of the discovery of the environment, from Sloterdijk’s atmo-terrorism and Radziwill’s war experiences to the awareness of the environment as an active element which we depend on, including the air, the light, and the vibrant matters. Maybe his atmospheric sensibilities as an artist stimulated Franz Radziwill to become a nature conservationist and one of the first environmentalists in Germany.

Environmentalism

After war, Franz Radziwill raised alarm for the protection of the coastal landscape which he considered as valuable as a piece of art, and he engaged in establishing a bird protection area on the peninsula of Dangast. He soon became the guard of this area, but he was maybe more feared than respected by his fellow human beings. There are many stories, told in the biography, in interviews⁶ and kept alive through gossip, how he relentlessly shied away intruders into the protection area, among them loving couples who tried to find a hidden place. On the other hand, he voluntarily guided real bird lovers into “his” protection area, showing them nests and breeding places. The peninsula was an endangered environment, long before our today’s concerns. In the second half of the twentieth century, Radziwill raised concerns over the emergence of mass tourism, trying to protect the charm and flair of the old sea-resort. In the seventies, he helped preventing the construction of a huge tourist resort, a predecessor of today’s project. But new houses mushroomed from the seventies onwards, changing the former village of fishers and farmers, and a few artists, into a tourist village.

Radziwill’s engagement with the environment was ambivalent, too. While he eagerly protected birds from human intervention, he defended coastal protection and land reclamation. A coastal landscape is under permanent construction. In the 1950s, the peninsula of Dangast had a different shape. When I took a walk with the daughter of Franz Radziwill from their house through the village and small forest to the *Klause*, a small pub right on top of the cliff, she showed me where she once took bath in the sea, and where today there is land. It was in the sixties when a new land reclamation project started, which finally led to the construction of the Dangast sluice and its small port as it is known today. Radziwill was in favor of this act of land reclamation, and he documented this process in a series of paintings, commissioned by the dike association.

⁶ For more details, see for example Constanze Radziwill (2014), in an excellent interview with Silke Puschmann.

An environmental concern for Franz Radziwill was gravel mining in the area of the *Kurhaus*. Gravel mining turned out to be a considerable source of income, and parts of the small forest fell victim to the *Kurhaus* owner's endeavor to exploit this natural resource. The two men, the owner and the painter, had fierce disputes about this issue, and as a result, Radziwill was banned lifelong from entering the property. This was a severe punishment, of course, as the *Kurhaus* area covers the cliff and provides the most spectacular view of the Jadebusen. There was only one exception, as his daughter told me: during winter storms, Radziwill went with his wife and daughter to the cliff to see the wild flood coming in. When the T. family looked out of the windows, the old T. remarked that "Here they are again, the Radziwills, it is storm flood time." It was a clash of two strong characters with diverging attitudes towards the coastal environment. The environmentalist Radziwill on the one side and the *Kurhaus* owner on the other. The latter was known for his liberal attitude; he welcomed mad artists, punks, or rockers on his property, as long as they cleaned up after their meetings or parties at the privately owned beach. But there are higher forces ruling on the peninsula of the blessed, which transcended these differences among mortals. At least, so the story goes.

On Radziwill's 75th birthday, the old T. surprisingly showed up to express his congratulations. He left with the words that he hoped to see Radziwill again as a guest in the *Kurhaus*. From then on, Radziwill left his house on Sunday mornings, leaving a note at the door that he was out for lunch in the *Kurhaus*, where he sat for many hours, watching new generations of artists, who were influenced by Joseph Beuys and felt honored by the presence of the now old and famous artist (Schmidt 2019: 191).

When I visited the exhibition in honor of the 125th birthday of Radziwill in Oldenburg, I felt nothing outdated or old fashioned in his work. Quite the contrary, I found many elements which I consider fundamental for understanding climate and its atmospheric changes. It is the atmosphere or the layers of different atmospheres which are expressed in the colors, in the topics, and their staging that made me feel attending a highly contemporary exhibition.

Seinsraum

There is a wooden fence in the sky, on the picture "The peninsula of the blessed in the twentieth century," with a hole in it that opens the view into the black. Birgit Denizel, the curator of the exhibition dedicated to the peninsula of the blessed, takes up a remark of Radziwill who speaks about Dangast as his *Seinsraum* (Denizel 2014, 21), an expression that reminds of Heidegger and his notion of dwelling, of being in the world. She states that he is not simply a regional painter who loves his home territory. Instead, she argues that

the concept of *Seinsraum* consists of a mix of realism, of exact observation, of symbolism, and of being contemporary, infused with the fundamental belonging of the human being to earth: "There is not even a taste of provincialism in his work," she states (Denizel 2014, 24).

Radziwill's peninsula of the blessed is neither provincial nor esoteric, and it is a contested space. The *Seinsraum* of Radziwill is more than nature and culture, it consists of many layers, and it includes the air, the senses, the materiality of things, and the atmosphere.

Progress and growth seem to be like natural forces that pave the road into the future, and they do not spare Dangast. The history of this sea-resort does not differ much from others, including the rise of mass tourism, and in turning art into a unique selling point. But not all people accept this rationale; instead, some people insist on the atmosphere which they see in Radziwill's paintings, and maybe feel in their own lives, too—they consider the world at large and Dangast not as a commodity on a competitive coastal market, but as a *Seinsraum*. In the last part of this article, I will follow these activists, their fights, performances, and also their defeats; there is something quixotic in their fight, but this does not mean that their efforts are futile.

Atmospheres of democracy

Dangast is a divided village, where some people do not exchange greetings anymore, according to the headline of a journalistic piece in a regional paper (NWZ 2017). The point of contention is the former *Kurpark* in the eastern part of the village, which the municipality sold to a real estate agent. The investor immediately started building apartments with an estimated capacity of 700 beds, more than two-thirds of them are already built, and the individual apartments are resold. This transaction, which changed the face of Dangast, was met by protests which led to the formation of a citizens' initiative, the "Bürgerinitiative (BI) Dangast."

During my research, I started visiting meetings of the local citizens' initiative, the BI Dangast. I introduced myself as being interested both in the social and the physical changes of the local climate. To my surprise, the activists nodded in agreement. I took my notebook and listened. The case was complicated, the battle was over, more or less. The initiative had protested, organized demonstrations, staged an art-performance, and written letters to the editor; they had attended municipal meetings and even had gone to court, where they lost the case for formal reasons—they were simply not entitled. The initiative accepted their failure, with a certain fatalism, but this was no reason to give up. They were still concerned about the quality of life in Dangast, which they consider as an artists' place, a *Künstlerdorf*, and which they want to save from a sell-out to an anonymous tourism

industry. Now, there is the new colony of uniform apartment houses on the eastern side of the village, while its western part, the area around the old *Kurhaus*, is still untouched. On tourist leaflets and in the official representation of Dangast, the image of an artists' village with a bohemian atmosphere is still welcomed, while the new apartments boost Dangast tourism into a new direction, attracting a new clientele of urban weekend tourists. Besides the immediate case of contention, there is a deeper concern: Who decides about the future of a coastal village? Who decides about the quality of life, who has the right to define it? Latour and Weibel (2005) displayed in their seminal exhibition in Karlsruhe how things are made public in different cultural, political, and geographical settings, and the subtitle to this exhibition was “*Atmospheres of democracy*.” This exhibition came to my mind when I followed the arguments of the BI Dangast and how they tried to preserve the specific atmosphere of Dangast.

Political atmospheres

During my research, I heard many versions and details about the deal between the municipality and the investor. At its core, there is the division between the coast and the inland, between rural and coastal politics. Is Dangast really a coastal village at all? It is part of the municipality of Varel, a town which lies 10 km inland. In an interview with the mayor of Varel, he told me that people from Varel do not necessarily have close bonds with the sea; they often prefer the public bath in Varel, he added smilingly. From their perspective, Dangast is considered as a diva, as posh, and as costly. Dangast, he said, makes a yearly deficit which the municipality has to pay for. These remarks lead to an understanding of the political atmosphere surrounding the ongoing conflicts in Dangast. To understand the political ethos underlying the concrete transactions—selling a former *Kurpark* to real estate investors—maybe a closer look at two central protagonists, the former mayor and the current *Kurdirektor*, might help.

The previous mayor of Varel, Karl-Heinz Funke, who had ruled the municipality for almost three decades, still casts a long shadow on present politics. He had made a career as a minister of agriculture in Lower Saxony and later on for Germany, both under the former German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, as part of a Lower Saxony network, so to speak. Personal relationships and networks are a good way to rule in a predominantly rural area, and Karl-Heinz Funke, who still is a farmer, is famous for knowing each and every one and for solving conflicts, also in informal ways. He likes to tell anecdotes, and I heard many about him. Finally, he had to resign as a minister during the foot-and-mouth disease, and as a mayor he stumbled over irregularities concerning the costs for his silver wedding jubilee day. He was kicked

out of the Social Democratic Party and is now the leader of the opposition in Varel. There is hardly any event in the past decades in this municipality which is not related to his networking activities.

There are many stories about the origins of the tourist investment, and one goes like this. As the mayor of Varel, Karl Heinz Funke had built a new thermal bath in Dangast, with the help of subsidies. It was a good deal first, but a yearly deficit resulted from this investment for which the municipality of Varel did not want to pay for. Instead of weighing in the additional income gained through tourism not at least because of the thermal bath, the municipality and its new mayor hired a restructuration manager from outside. Because restructuration manager does not sound good, he was given the honorary title of a *Kurdirektor*. In order to reduce the deficit, he sold the existing *Kurpark* in the middle of the village a domestic real estate agency. Karl-Heinz Funke did not really agree with this deal, but in the journal *NWZ* (2017), he offered an explanation why this happened anyway. He argues that Dangast is by no means a coastal village; it is a rural village. He is the best example for this, because he is still is a farmer with property close to the village. People think that Dangast is an artists' or a fisher village, he argued, but this is not true, it is a rural one. Consequently, the council members of the municipality of Varel voted for the restructuration.

The *Kurdirektor* prides himself for being a rational economist whose job is to keep the numbers straight. He understands local concerns, and he shares the appreciation of Dangast's artistic atmosphere. In an interview, he explained to me that in terms of numbers, the visitors of the Radziwill museum are almost non-existent compared to the number of tourists visiting Dangast and the thermal bath. In his job, he said with an ironic undertone, he helps destroying the environment; mass tourism is decadent, he explained, because in the Stone Age, people did not need the luxury of vacation and health infrastructures, they simply hunted the deer and ate the meat.

Like in sports, he receives a bonus for reducing the yearly deficit. He understands the concerns of the citizens' initiative, he likes art, too, but unfortunately, he argues, someone has to pay for it. The municipality seems to be happy about his performance and attitude, and he is commissioned now to restructure other areas of the municipality, as well. Even though the former mayor was not directly involved in the transaction, his role serves well to measure the transition from a rural to a neoliberal society. It is a transition from populism based in a rural world to the teleology of statistics in neoliberalism, and each step of this process is anchored in the history of a place and its protagonists.

The restructuration process—selling public property to an investor—gave birth to the BI Dangast, the citizens' initiative that wanted to save the specific atmosphere of Dangast

as an artists' place. Consequently, there was an art performance at the beginning of the protest.

Dangast has face: the art of protest

Anthropologists may interpret artwork, too, just as I did in the first part. But mostly, they are interested in art as a form of practice; they want to know what art does, how it mediates social relationships (Myers 2004; Krauß 2015). Of course, Radziwill serves as a figurehead for Dangast, but art is practiced by many people and for different purposes. In the fight against the new tourist resort, art was used as a tool of protest and for social agitation.

The vacuum in the transition period from the old use of the *Kurpark* to its new destination as a commercial tourist resort was filled by local citizens with art. Local artists occupied the deserted buildings of the former municipal *Kurpark* and turned them into a permanent exhibition space. In 2013, when the first rumors were heard about the sale of the public ground to a private investor, the photographer Gunnar Voigt initiated an art performance with local inhabitants in the tradition of Joseph Beuys, called “Dangast hat Gesicht” (Dangast has face). In former times, they said, people used to sit outside, but nowadays, nobody knows who is living in the houses. Gunnar Voigt made photos of inhabitants, giving them a face, in front of their houses before a white screen. He enlarged the photos, made them weather proof, and arranged several performances. Performing a social plastic, people posed with their photos in front of the old *Kurhaus* (Fig. 4), on the vessel *Etta von Dangast*, at the beach, on the Kaiser-Wilhelm bridge in Wilhemshaven and other places. These social plastics gained a lot of attention; there were reports in the press and on TV. Many of the participants posted these black and white photographs in front of their houses, in their gardens, where they are still on display.

As an art performance, “Dangast has face” argues for the continuity of Dangast as a *Künstlerdorf*, a place for artists. The change in motifs is striking: while Radziwill put

Fig. 4 Dangast hat Gesicht. Photo by Gunnar Voigt

the environment into the foreground, their art performance is a social plastic, showing human faces and nothing else, with no background at all. The intention was to shift attention to the social costs of the restructuring of Dangast, to the social atmosphere which is at risk. In an interview on the website of the photographer, Gunnar Voigt, the *Kurdi- rektor* pays respect to the initiative, but he does so on his own terms: If they do not play foul and have good arguments, he said, he is confident that there might be found compromises.

Facebook serves all over the world as a tool to establish, maintain, and expand the scope of social relationships (Miller 2011). The BI Dangast established as a follow-up to “Dangast has face” a Facebook account, which is called “*Dangast gestalten, Dangast behalten*” (shaping Dangast, keeping Dangast). The site informs about news and media articles concerning Dangast, but mostly photos of Dangast are displayed, by professional and amateur photographers. There is an endless stream of photos, with a predominance of sundown motifs and comments that praise the uniqueness and beauty of the place. These pictures differ in professionalism, but they are social pictures. It is a Facebook group that creates community and displays a coastal atmosphere which is dear to those who participate in it, including tourists.

Atmospheres of democracy: the citizens' initiative

The battle is lost; most of the new houses are built. The citizens' initiative still exists; its members are mostly senior citizens, a former medical doctor and his wife, a retired municipal administrator, a former pilot, members of the Radziwill society, Constanze Radziwill, who is a film maker, the photographer Gunnar Voigt, and others—people who were born here or came here for retirement. They meet every second Tuesday in the *Strandhotel*. The history of their activities is documented on their website, in TV reports, regional, and national newspapers. One report in the regional journal, “Dangast the divided village, where people don't talk to each other anymore” (NWZ 2017), even won a prize. Even though the battle is lost, they are still concerned about the future of Dangast. Members of the group regularly attend sessions of the municipality, and they make ample use of the “*Bürgerfragestunde*,” the opportunity for citizens to pose questions at the beginning of the municipal sessions. They are a constant reminder that municipal democracy is more than routine negotiations between parties, backed up by the administrations; they try to bring life into the routinized practices, they try to challenge the real or only assumed networks which make politics behind the back of the citizens. Sometimes their interventions reminded me of Don Quixote and his fight against windmills, sometimes I admired the grassroots spirit that pervaded the dusty spheres of democracy and brought new life into it, at least temporarily.

I attended several meetings of the initiative, and I was baffled by their expertise. The discussions are polite and sometimes lengthy; all persons have the right to express their opinion, to share their knowledge and to pose questions. There is an air of melancholy, sometimes, because they have lost the case. But there is still a fighting spirit, because the story never ends. For a while, they tried to prevent the last stage of construction, to save a small rest of the former *Kurpark*, at least. They had discovered a part of the *Kurpark* once had served as a deposit for toxic waste, which turned out to be true—the municipality had to take responsibility and to clean it up for the investor. It was a moment of triumph for the initiative, but, of course, they could not stop the process. They want to keep Dangast as an artists' place, and doing so means keeping this special atmosphere alive, creating a special forcefield, as the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2011) puts it. To make sense of a place, to bring it into being, is hard work. Places are not simply out there, they have to be constructed from memory, by knowledge, through practice, they have to be processed, and connections have to be drawn to the world at large, in order to put the local into place.

There is for example global climate change. The new apartment complex is built too close to the dike which protects the area from the sea, but the investors obviously got an exemption from the dike association. A former member of coastal protection in the initiative, a retired engineer, has detailed information that the rise of sea level as an effect of climate change puts Dangast's safety at risk. And how come that the *Kurdirektor* invests money into the camping place in front of the dike, an area, which now is already closed between October and April due to storm floods in winter? This is an unacceptable risk, in the retired engineer's eyes, but it is difficult to get a hearing. Another issue is mobility: how to solve the problem with the traffic jams in Dangast? There are influences and interests which have to be considered; the traffic jam on weekends in Dangast is entangled in a web of global connections, too. One former administrator has filed a complaint at the European Union because of the judgment against their rejected lawsuit. In a session of the BI, he presents a report about his odyssey through bureaucracy, reading the communications with administrators and politicians on all levels at length, with the others listening attentively. Who is responsible in this world, who decides, who is allowed to speak? But finally, the initiative presented a plan how to deal with the traffic caused by day visitors to Dangast, they informed the newspaper in order put pressure on local politics. But the municipality presented a plan of their own, routinely ignoring the ideas of the BI, according to its members. The sessions of the initiative, their discussions and interventions, give an idea of what an atmosphere of democracy means—and how fragile and endangered this atmosphere is.

Conclusion: exploring coastal atmospheres

The anthropologist Anna Tsing famously defined the art of noticing as a way of looking around rather than ahead. This means not to think and to describe reality in oppositions like nature and culture or in terms of progress and growth, but to make explicit how the world comes into being. Exploring coastal atmospheres means to notice the interaction between people, the *Schlick*, the bricks, the plants, the dead souls from past tragedies, and the light that shines on the “peninsula of the blessed” and the ruins of civilization. Anthropologists always were aware that local politics, rituals, or everyday activities in different cultures take place in a specific atmosphere which is shared by all people but which is so hard to define. Materiality is vibrant matter (Bennett 2010); the sounds, smells, tastes, and airs specific to a place affect the way we perceive and interact with the world. Atmospheres can be made explicit, through the art of noticing, through making art, or through the art of protest. But atmospheres are hard to pin down, they can hardly be turned into a practicability or a tool to achieve something. They transcend the divide between nature and culture, between people and things, and they bring the world into being. The focus on atmospheres shifts the attention on the process of “worlding,” of bringing into being a place, a force-field, a reality that is evoked, maintained, and shared by a group of people, at least temporarily (Stewart 2011). The peninsula of the blessed belongs to no one; it is common ground that we depend on, it is a condition of life for human beings, it is a *Seinsraum* in the strict sense of the term. Its foundation is the art of noticing, of being attentive and being able to look around, and of putting aside the teleology of progress and growth. Looking around means taking care.

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